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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001105

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SUBJECT: ISRAELI COMMENTS ON SYRIAN PEACE TALKS

REF: DAMASCUS 359

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 21, PM Olmert's office announced that Israel is holding serious indirect talks with Syria over a comprehensive peace agreement. Embassy Tel Aviv has reported the existence of this channel since the summer of 2007, but PM Olmert first announced indirect contacts with Syria through Turkey during Passover interviews in April. The talks will follow the Madrid Framework, be led by Yoram Turbowicz, Olmert's Chief of Staff, and will be indirect, through Turkish mediation. Senior MFA officials have told us that Olmert only informed Foreign Minister Livni two hours before his office released its public announcement. Opposition members responded to the announcement by accusing Olmert of attempting to distract the Israeli public from his own legal problems, but several journalists noted that that these talks began in February 2007, over a year before the investigation began. END SUMMARY.

Politics of Peace

¶2. (U) An overnight poll released May 22 found a majority of Israelis believe the timing of the announcement was intended to distract from the latest corruption investigation against Olmert. Opposition Knesset members from Likud and the National Union-National Religious Party (NU-NRP) accused Olmert of trying to sell the Golan to save himself. Within the coalition, MK Danny Yatom of Labor also questioned the Prime Minister's motives. Shas threatened to quit the coalition if the government became serious about relinquishing the Golan Heights "to the axis of evil." Olmert, for his part, has denied Syrian claims that he committed himself to a withdrawal from the Golan, preferring to stick to the locution that he knows what Syria wants, and the Syrians know what Israel wants.

¶3. (U) Meanwhile some recent polls have found that between 52% and 70% of Israelis are against conceding the Golan Heights in exchange for peace. MK Yossi Beilin told reporters that the polling numbers do not mean much, as he believes that Israelis will accept returning the Golan Heights when they realize peace with Syria would mean they could "drive to Paris."

Is Peace Possible? Separating Syria from Iran

¶4. (U) On May 21, FM Livni told visiting French FM Kouchner that a definitive break with Iran and all terror organizations is a pre-requisite for peace with Syria. MoD Barak said that he believes that "bringing Syria out of the circle of hostilities is an important step but we need to remain realistic...a peace agreement is still a long way

off." PM Olmert stated on May 21 that "negotiations will not be easy, it will not be simple and it is possible that it will take a long time and may eventually involve difficult concessions. At the same time, after weighing all the relevant data and hearing the opinions of all Israel's security and intelligence bodies, I reached the conclusion that the chances in this case outweighed the risks, and with this hope, today we embark on this path." Olmert also noted that former Prime Ministers Rabin, Netanyahu and Barak all "invested efforts in this channel and were even prepared to make painful and far-reaching concessions to achieve peace with Syria."

15. (C) The former deputy National Security Advisor and now MFA's new Director of Policy Planning, Eran Etzion, told PolCouns May 22 that former National Security Advisor Ilan Mizrahi deserves much of the credit for convincing Olmert to move forward with the Syrian track as a way to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran. Etzion said, however, that he doubted the Olmert government would last long enough to see either these or the Palestinian negotiations to their conclusion given the seriousness of Olmert's political problems.

16. (C) The head of MFA's Research Department (INR A/S-equivalent) Nimrod Barkan confirmed to PolCouns May 22 reports that Olmert had only informed Foreign Minister Livni two hours before the public announcement. According to Barkan, Livni was upset that she had been kept out of the loop, and also concerned about a potential negative impact on the Palestinian track. Barkan noted that Barak and the IDF strongly support the decision to open negotiations with

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Syria. Bashar Al-Asad, in his view, remains motivated by a desire to resume normal relations with the United States and may condition shifting the negotiations from proximity talks to direct negotiations -- normally a key Israeli demand -- on the U.S. replacing Turkey's role after the next administration takes office. Barkan shared Etzion's skepticism that the Olmert government would be able to see these talks through to their conclusion, but he still stressed that merely the announcement of peace negotiations with Syria would constrain Syria's negative behavior in Lebanon and keep the Iranians off balance.

17. (U) Itamar Rabinovich, who headed Syrian negotiations for PM Rabin, summed up the major obstacles in an editorial for Ma'ariv. According to Rabinovich, the main challenges are lack of U.S. participation, Olmert's political crisis, and the psychological barrier of changing Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) from an exclusively Israeli preserve to an international body of water. Rabinovich also writes that Syrian President Asad lacks the power to convince his people to accept normalization with Israel, and that Asad does not have the strength to break with Iran.

18. (U) In a commentary in Ma'ariv, Amir Rappaport writes that IDF Chief of General Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Israeli Defense Intelligence (IDI) director Amos Yadlin were skeptical but supported the talks, while Mossad Director Meir Dagan had, until recently, counseled against them. Rappaport noted a split between Yadlin and his deputy, Yossi Baidatz, over whether the talks would succeed.

19. (C) Senior IDF officials, including the Ground Forces Commander, have told DAO officers that "the road to solving Lebanon, Hizballah, and disrupting the Iran chain of linkages is through Damascus." Several months ago, Yadlin told PolOff that he supported talks despite the fact that he does not believe they will succeed in separating Syria from Iran, but admitted that his Deputy, Yossi Baidatz disagreed and was convinced Syria would abandon Iran for reconciliation with the West. He also noted that the last time there were talks with Syria, in 2000, Iran was a relatively minor consideration and peace with Syria would reduce the threat

from Hizballah. He now believes that Iran, not Syria, controls Hizballah, so peace with Syria does not necessarily mean a peaceful northern border.

Structure of the Talks

¶10. (C) According to press reports, Olmert's Chief of Staff, Yoram Turbowicz, and his chief foreign policy advisor, Shalom Tourgeman, will regularly, but indirectly, meet with Syrian officials in Turkey through a Turkish mediator. The PMO's press announcement of May 21 (published simultaneously in Jerusalem, Damascus and Ankara) stated that the two sides "decided to pursue the dialogue between them in a serious and continuous way, in order to achieve the goal of a comprehensive peace in accordance with the (1991) Madrid Conference terms of reference for peace." The Madrid framework calls for establishing the border, setting a schedule for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, defining security arrangements, and normalizing relations. Some press reports say water rights will also be on the agenda. Even before the announcement, veterans of past negotiations with Syria have told us they have been busy putting together a complete file on past negotiations and commitments, which they have quietly shared with the Prime Minister's Office and MOD Barak in order to help them prepare for substantive negotiations.

¶11. (U) Yedioth Ahronoth political analyst Shimon Schiffer wrote that sources within the Prime Minister's office told him the Syrians have insisted on indirect talks until the U.S. is involved. He also noted that there is little chance of Israel moving past procedural discussion to real substance until the two sides are talking face-to-face.

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JONES